A SUBSTITUTE FOR PROSE COMPOSITION
IN THE TEACHING OF LATIN

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For many years one of the chief weapons in the arsenal of the Latin teacher was Prose Composition, the turning of set English sentences into Latin. In recent years, however, the technique has fallen into disfavor in many quarters. Most of the textbooks use the Reading Approach, although they still include English sentences for the teachers that want to use them.

When questioned about methods, most teachers, aware of the unfashionable state of Prose Composition, claim to put little emphasis on this activity, but questioning often reveals that this actually amounts to a third or a half of the total time.

The common argument against Prose Composition runs somewhat as follows: Although writing Latin was a valid goal in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when an educated man had a real need for this skill to participate in the activities of state, church, law, science, or scholarship, the modern objective is reading. Prose composition requires a great deal of active learning of forms and vocabulary and consumes time which might better be spent in actual reading. Lastly, say the critics, the activity is dull and unrewarding to the student.

Almost all the modern texts, therefore, stress the reading of graded material which proceeds smoothly from "made" Latin to an adapted author, usually Caesar, in which the greater difficulties have been removed. Students who continue Latin beyond the second year of high school advance to authors that have not been adapted, traditionally Cicero and Vergil.

Many experienced teachers, however, believe that in practice these carefully graded texts do not provide the smooth transition which they promise. Through trial and error they have proved, to their own satisfaction at least, that their students do not do as well without Prose Composition; and in spite of the theoretical objections given above they continue to use this technique. Structural linguistics seems to throw considerable light upon this controversy.
The Reading Method, at least as it actually operates at the present, is deficient in one vital respect: the easy Latin does not demonstrate the essential features of Latin. First of all, it is written in a word order that is essentially English, thus permitting the students to comprehend the syntax by English signals of position rather than by Latin signals of inflection. The students will interpret puer as subject in Puer puellam spectat not because of its nominative form but because in their experience the subject, if expressed, always precedes the object. They have never seen such a sentence as Puellam spectat puer. The verb is identified as a verb not because of its morphological characteristics but because it regularly comes last in declarative sentences, first in questions or commands. In other words, in these beginning texts, word order is most emphatically a grammatical signal, although it is not in real Latin. With their background of English, American students rely upon these pseudo-signals of position and ignore the real signals of the inflectional endings.

Vocabulary is similarly oversimplified. The pupils have no chance to observe that words are areas of meaning and not points of meaning because in this material vocabulary items are used in such contexts that they may consistently be translated by one English meaning. Gerō, for example, almost invariably patterns with bellum to mean wage, ignoring the dozens of other equally common meanings.

It is a commonplace among those who have applied linguistics to practical language teaching that fundamental points of structure must be mastered. Bloomfield felt it necessary to use caps when he said, "LANGUAGE LEARNING IS OVER-LEARNING; ANYTHING LESS IS OF NO USE." Passive reading of material which disguises the nature of the signals does not lead to mastery.

The active production of essential elements of structure through Prose Composition is a decided improvement over passive reading, but it too has serious flaws when viewed in the light of descriptive linguistics. For one thing, instead of demanding perfect control of one or two items at a time, it presents the student with a bewildering number of simultaneous problems. The laborious construction at home of five or ten sentences with grammar and dictionary is not a normal speech activity. Then again, the beginning student is not given

\[1\text{Outline Guide for the Practical Study of Foreign Languages, Leonard Bloomfield (Baltimore, 1942) 12.}\]
natural English to turn into Latin; the English sentences are predigested, written in a sort of metalanguage half way between English and Latin in order to suggest the forms that are expected. The student is taught that English of calls for a Latin genitive (except for because of, which is propter and the accusative), that to and for require a Latin dative (except for expressions like to the town, which is ad and the accusative), and so on, a series of one-to-one correspondences with their exceptions, all effectively concealing the essential differences between the language systems.

The recall of Latin words for their English equivalents is painfully slow, and both poor students and good habitually look up almost every word in an English-Latin dictionary. If the knowledge so laboriously acquired were useful, there might be little objection, but the very words for which they have learned a single English meaning will prove to be the chief stumbling blocks when they try to read a Latin author.

The principles of descriptive linguistics provide a guide for the creation of materials for beginning Latin classes. Such materials may have the following features:

a) Selections from Latin authors arranged in a hierarchy of structure, beginning with single sentences and working up to continuous discourse.
b) Explanation of structure by constant contrast between English and Latin.
c) Memorization and overlearning of about 150 Latin quotations and mottoes.
d) Pattern Practices based on these quotations.
e) Oral-aural work, both in class and in the language laboratory.
f) Writing of original Latin sentences which imitate Latin selections which they already know.

This paper will concern itself with the last technique, which seems to be an effective substitute for Prose Composition.

The method has been tried and the results have been found interesting. After about two and a half months of Latin, the students of a University of Michigan class were asked to hand in fifty original sentences. Here is a sentence from each paper. Although this is not a random sampling, since only the better sentences are chosen, this selection gives a reasonably accurate picture of the papers as a whole:

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2 These features have been incorporated into mimeographed materials produced by the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Michigan.
LANGUAGE LEARNING

Quō caret saepe capit.
Laudem semper amat et numnum fēmina.
Dub cunt volentem amōrēs, nōlentem trahunt.
Ébrietatem quō vincit hostem superat maximum.
Cōgitur ad lacrimās fēmina dum vir cōgitur ad vinum.
Ut vēr dat flōrem, hiems sīc reddit nivem.
Quō sua jactat indignē vivit.
Quō nōn habet pecūniam, lītem habet atque dolōrem.
Nōn redit unda fluēns; nōn redit bona fortūna.
Ab oculō pūrō pūra défluit lacrima.
Canis vulpe sapientius est.
Exemplō melius quam verbō hominēs dūcuntur.
Fēmina laudem, vir rem vult.
Fēlicitās in oculō est, sed dolor in corde est.
Quō capit uxorēm, capit amōrem et fidem.
Saepius illae cadunt quae volunt fātum sublīme.
Quō prō uxorē dīcit, satis est eloquēns.

And one enterprising soul even essayed a poem as one of his fifty contributions:

Ut vēr dat flōrēs
et autumnum colorēs,
sīc studium saepe honōrēs.

Not only do these sentences say something worthwhile, but they employ various rhetorical devices of word order.

Students may be shown how to write original sentences after two weeks of Latin. In this time, besides acquiring a general orientation to a structural approach to language study, they should have memorized about five Basic Sentences, such as the following:

Vestis virum facit. Erasmus
Prūdens cum cūrā vivit, stultus sine cūrā. Medieval
Vulpēs vult fraudem, lupus agnum, fēmina laudem. Medieval
Ā cane nōn magnō saepe tenētur aper. Ovid
Ā fonte pūrō pūra défluit aqua. Anon.

and should have thoroughly studied about twenty-five Overlearns, such as:

Fūrem für cognōscit et lupum lupus. Anon.
In pulchrā veste sapiēns nōn vivit honestē. Medieval

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Fortiter, fideliter, felicititer.  
Rem, non spem, quaerit amicus.  
Nemo in amore videt.  
Manus manum lavat.  
Fide et amore.  
Amor gignit amorem.  
Injuria solvit amorem.  
Veritas numquam perit.  
Lis item generat.  
Deus vult!  
Virtute fideque.  
Occasio facit furem.  
Vitam regit fortuna, non sapientia.  
Lux et veritas.  
Amphora sub veste numquam portatur honeste.  
Antiqua veste pauper vestitur honeste.  
Vincit veritas.  
Virtute et labore.  
Nemo solus satis sapit.  
De sapienti viro facta tura cito stultum.  
Totam hodie Romam Circus capit.  
Lex videt Tratu, Tratus legem non videt.  
In omnire vincit imitatiorem veritas.

Carmen de figuris  
Propertius  
Seneca  
Motto  
Anon.  
Anon.  
Seneca  
Burton  
Battle Cry of First Crusade  
Motto  
Anon.  
Cicero  
Motto of Yale  
Medieval  
Medieval  
Motto  
Motto  
Plautus  
Medieval  
Juvenal  
Syrus  
Cicero

Such mottoes and quotations may be chosen on the following basis:

a) Content (student interest, illustration of Roman and medieval cultural traits, etc.)
b) Vocabulary (occurrence in later selections)
c) Structure (to this point, nominative, accusative, and ablative singular of the nouns and the third singular, active and passive, of the present tense of the verb).

The students are now shown how one may change any of these utterances by substitution, expansion, or transformation in the following manner.

One may substitute for a word in a given form class any other word in that group that has the same corresponding form. That is, for a personal noun in the ablative one may substitute any other personal noun in the ablative. Under certain conditions some substitutions across form classes is permitted. At this state the following form classes have been set up:  

3 Further subclasses must be set up later on.
LANGUAGE LEARNING

Declinable words

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal nouns:</th>
<th>vir</th>
<th>lupus</th>
<th>canis</th>
<th>nēmō</th>
<th>vulpēs</th>
<th>für</th>
<th>agnus</th>
<th>aper</th>
<th>deus</th>
<th>fēmina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonpersonal nouns:</td>
<td>rēs</td>
<td>cūra</td>
<td>fidēs</td>
<td>fraus</td>
<td>injūria</td>
<td>līs</td>
<td>vita</td>
<td>manus</td>
<td>labor</td>
<td>vēritās</td>
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<td></td>
<td>lūx</td>
<td>fōns</td>
<td>Rōma</td>
<td>Cīrcus</td>
<td>fortūna</td>
<td>lēx</td>
<td>amor</td>
<td>aqua</td>
<td>vestis</td>
<td>amphihora</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Īra</td>
<td>spēs</td>
<td>laus</td>
<td>virtūs</td>
<td>occasīo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>imitātiō</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Transitive verbs: | regit | vincit | lavat | quaerit |
|                  | tenet | solvit | capit | cognōscit |
|                  | portat | gignit | videt | generat |

| Transitival verbs: | facit | vult |

| Intransitive verbs: | vīvit | perit | sapit | dēfluit |

| Adjectives: | pulcher | sapiēns | honestus | fortis | fīdelis |
|             | fēlix  | prūdēns | magnus  | pūrus  | omnis  |
|             | sōlus  | stultus | antiquus | īrātus | tōtus  |
|             |        |        |          |        | citus   |

| Adverbs: | pulchrē | sapienter | fīdēliter | honestē |
|          | stultē  | fēliciter | fortiter  | prūdenter |

4Identified now by meaning, later by formal characteristics: use as subject of first or second persons, use as vocative, use with ā/ab and a passive verb to show agent.

5Identified by the contrast between the active ending -t and the passive ending -tur. An accusative with this class of verb indicates Direct Object.

6Identified by listing here but formally by the lack of passive forms. An accusative with these verbs indicates Direct Object.

7Identified here by listing but formally by having no passive forms (except occasionally the third singular, the so-called impersonal use). An accusative with this class of verb is an adverbial modifier; this accusative will either pattern with a preposition, as in Flūmen ad mare dēfluit or if without a preposition will belong to a small list of words (multum, nihil, Rōmam, etc.) Some of these intransitives are occasionally used as transitivals, but not in our corpus.

8Identified here by listing, but formally by having a contrast between masculine-feminine and neuter.

9Identified by the morphemes -ē and -ter added to adjective bases.
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Indeclinable words

Adverbials: nōn numquam satis saepe hōdiē
Conjunctions: et -que
Prepositions: in cum sine ā/ab sub

Taking as our model an Overlearn from page 11, Rem, nōn spēm, quaerit amīcus ("A friend wants cash and not encouragement") we may substitute for rem any word in the nonpersonal class if we put it into the accusative case. (The students have been given the nominative, accusative, and ablativ singular of each word when it first appeared.) If we take the first four words at random, we obtain the following:

Lūtem, nōn spēm, quaerit amīcus.
Lūcem, nōn spēm, quaerit amīcus.
Lēgem, nōn spēm, quaerit amīcus.
Trām, nōn spēm, quaerit amīcus.

Since we did not select these words with regard for their lexical compatibility with the rest of the sentence, these originals are not particularly meaningful. When we try substitutions for the spēm, we will consider the lexical meaning:

Rem, nōn laudem, quaerit amīcus.
Rem, nōn injūriām, quaerit amīcus.
Rem, nōn sapientiam, quaerit amīcus.
Rem, nōn amōrem, quaerit amīcus.

In substituting for the verb, we choose from the same group as quaerit, that is from the transitives:

Rem, nōn spēm, generat amīcus.

Finally, we may substitute for amīcus, which is an adjective here used as a personal noun. We may choose from

10Identified by listing.
11We know that it is used as a noun because there is no noun for it to be in agreement with. We know that it is personal because it is masculine and not neuter. Some adjectives have a neuter form that is a nonpersonal noun (bonum, malum, etc.).
either the list of the personal nouns or the list of adjectives:

Rem, nōn spēm, quaerit fēmina.
Rem, nōn spēm, quaerit sapiēns.

We may substitute more than one element at a time:

Laudem, nōn lītem, quaerit amīcus.

In fact, we may change them all (except the nōn):

Vestem, nōn amphoram, lavat fēmina.

Expansion involves the addition or subtraction of items. At this stage the students can add (or subtract) adverbs, adverbials, ablatives, or any words in series. By addition:

Rem, nōn spēm, saepe quaerit amīcus.

And by subtraction:

Rem quaerit amīcus.

Transformation involves a change in syntax. At this point the students understand only the change from active to passive and the reverse:

Rēs, nōn spēs, quaeritur ab amīcō.

By combining these three processes of substitution, expansion, and transformation (and changing the word order, if necessary) we can change any utterance into any other utterance. Here is how one might change *Injūria solvit amōrem* into *Vērilās numquam perit*:

*Injūria solvit amōrem.*
*Injūriā solvitur amor.* (transformation)
*Solvitur amor.* (expansion)
*Perit amor.* (substitution)

12A passive verb (without the type of ablative modifier traditionally called Means and Agent) is interchangeable with an intransitive verb.
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Perit vēritās. (substitution)
Perit numquam vēritās. (expansion)
Vēritās numquam perit. (change of word order)

As a first assignment in original sentence writing, a class may be given the following instructions:
"Write twenty-five original sentences, using the techniques as indicated:
a. Five sentences where one word has been substituted.
b. Five sentences where two words have been substituted.
c. Five sentences where three words have been substituted.
d. Five sentences where you use only expansion.
e. Five sentences where you use transformation without expansion or substitution."

Here is one correct sentence from each paper that was handed in by a class which had had eight lessons in Latin. To see if the description was adequate, the only explanation given them was that in their text, essentially as it has been presented above.13

Vir in amore videt.
Manus lavat amphotarum.
Fortūnā vida regitur, nōn sapientiā.
Rem, nōn litem, quaerit für.
Ā fūre für cognōscitur et ā lupō lupus.
Fīdēs numquam perit.
Amōre amor gignitur.
Vīrō honestō pura défluit vēritās.
Fēmina injūriam cognōscit.
Stultus tenet numquam rem, numquam amōrem.
Vestīs fēminam facit.
Amor saepe perit.
Vītam capit labor.
Vīr vult amōrem, lupus agnum, fēmina rem.

13 It should be noted that two students were unable to do this assignment at all. While it is possible that proper explanation in class before they were asked to do the assignment might have improved their performance, it is my opinion that emotional disturbance rather than lack of understanding was involved. One student, who had had two years of high school Latin but was repeating, dropped the course within a few days. The other student finished the semester far behind everyone else.
When the students reach connected discourse, they can be required to paraphrase a passage in Latin, making at least one change in each sentence. This type of exercise would seem to have the following advantages over the traditional Prose Composition:

a. It gives the student a sense of achievement. He has expressed his own thoughts in a foreign language.
b. The emphasis is upon producing whole utterances rather than putting pieces together.
c. There is little vocabulary burden; the student uses the words which he knows.
d. Errors are few.
e. The student learns something about the rhetorical uses of word order.
f. Reference is to a Latin model, not an English one, and the activity is carried on largely in Latin.